

# Long-range perspectives in the *Iliad*

Helen van Noorden

The events narrated in the *Iliad* take place over a very few days. But that does not mean that the poem has no concern for the grand narrative in history. Helen van Noorden here explores the ways in which the *Iliad* repeatedly reminds the reader of the bigger story, and gives us a glimpse of why that matters.

The narrative of the *Iliad*, despite its name, does not go as far as the fall of Troy (Ilium). This is often a source of disappointment for modern readers, but it won't Homer praise in antiquity. Other Greek epics moved very quickly through the build-up to the Trojan War, its climax and its aftermath. For example, a poem attributed to the archaic poet Hesiod, from around the same time as that of Homer, offers a brief overview of both Trojan and Theban Wars as the main events of the generation of our ancestors, the heroes:

*...who are called half-divine,  
the former generation on the  
boundless earth.  
Evil war and awful battle  
destroyed these,  
some under the seven gates of  
Thebes in the land of Cadmus  
fighting for the sake of Oedipus'  
sheep,  
others, having brought them in  
boats over the great gulf of the sea  
to Troy for the sake of fair-haired  
Helen.*

In the *Iliad*, there is very little of Hesiod's summary approach to human history. Homer concentrates on a single episode near the end of the siege of Troy; the wrath of Achilles against his commander Agamemnon. Indeed, most of the *Iliad*, over 15,000 verses long, concentrates on just a few days, and only a few major heroes die. Nevertheless, the *Iliad* extends its ostensibly narrow scope through several long-range perspectives, effectively covering the entire Trojan War, and hinting at its place in world history.

## Punishing Paris' choice

First, Achilles' angry withdrawal from and return to battle is presented as key to Trojan fortunes. The fall of Troy is anti-

cipated by the climax of the *Iliad* in Achilles' defeat of Troy's champion, Hector, whose name means 'the holder'. One simile in book 22 makes the equivalence explicit: at the sight of Hector dragged around the walls, the Trojans mourn as if their city itself were burning.

Second, the final destruction of the city is explicitly predicted several times in the *Iliad*; for example, by Zeus to Hera in book 15. Most of the human characters, of course, are not privileged to know the exact contours of the divine will; they can be deceived by false visions, as when Zeus in book 2 sends to Agamemnon a Dream, falsely promising the early capture of Troy, in order to lure him into battle where many of his men will die. Nevertheless, certainty about the ending is expressed by human characters on both sides: Agamemnon in book 4 and Hector in book 6. Troy is doomed; it is just a question of when.

Does the *Iliad* explain why Troy must fall? Zeus himself provocatively raises this question. Following Menelaus' near-defeat of Paris in a duel on behalf of the two sides, Zeus makes a suggestion to Hera: they could appease the armies such that Menelaus take home Helen and Troy itself would survive. Athena and Hera, however, will not hear of it, rather planning misery for the Trojans; such is Hera's hatred of Troy that she is even willing to give up to Zeus her favourite cities in the Peloponnese.

What Priam and his sons have done to upset her is well known: it is jealousy at Paris' choice of Aphrodite as the most beautiful goddess, responding to her presentation of Helen as a bribe. But his famous Judgement is not mentioned until book 24, where it explains the continuing resentment of Hera and Athena against all Trojans, even the dead Hector, whom the other gods are proposing to steal away from Achilles. At this point, recollection

of the event that triggered the entire Trojan War ironically aligns a lofty perspective on the resulting destruction with the pettiness of the goddesses who cannot forget the insult.

## Holy Troy?

The only other divinity objecting to the preservation of Hector's body in book 24 is Poseidon, whose anger against the Trojans stems from a different source. Poseidon had to build the original walls of Troy for its arrogant king Laomedon, who then cheated him of his pay. In Poseidon's eyes, the city and its inhabitants deserve destruction in return for Laomedon's crooked dealing.

Poseidon, like Hera, explicitly connects Troy to an older personal insult, but we may feel that his complaint stands on slightly higher moral ground. Is Poseidon's sense of the city's founding injustice supported elsewhere in the *Iliad*? More usually, the city is called 'holy Troy'; the people of Priam, regularly sacrificing to Zeus, have won his favour. Indeed, Zeus' regret at allowing his Trojan son Sarpedon to die is one famous pressure point between Zeus' own allegiances and 'fate' in the poem. Even vengeful Poseidon takes action in book 20 to ensure that Aeneas survives to found a new kingly race, as is his fate (lines which Roman readers connected to the events told in the *Aeneid*).

For audiences considering the significance of Troy from a more-than-mortal perspective, there is one extended simile which stands out for its moral dimension: the roar of the Trojan chariots fleeing before Patroclus (book 16) is compared to that of torrents sent by Zeus to sweep away the works of men, in anger at their crooked judgements in the assembly. Similes of Zeus sending storms and floods are not uncommon in the *Iliad*, but this one goes beyond any traditional idea of Zeus as a weather-god; it rather approaches the Zeus in the poem of Hesiod mentioned earlier, who is guaranteed to punish humans for unjust actions.

## Reflections in Achilles' Shield

This simile also raises the question of the extent to which certain famous, static images within the *Iliad* reflect the plot of the poem. The largest-scale image in the *Iliad* is the Shield crafted by Hephaestus in book 18, in response to Thetis' request that he make new armour for Achilles. Hephaestus' creation is quite unlike the shields of other warriors in the poem. Models of the earth, sea, and sky with the constellations frame detailed images of two anonymous cities, one with feasts and peaceful arbitration, and one under siege. Then come scenes from the worlds of farming and herding, progressing through the seasons, and images of a youthful dance.

On one reading, the Shield is a 'cosmic icon'; in its purview, going far beyond the *Iliad*, cities will always be at war or peace, just as seasons will always change. Other readers, however, have pointed to echoes of the poem's main narrative in the images of the two cities, as if to imply that the Shield reflects more closely on the rights and wrongs of the war at Troy; for example, does its image of peaceful arbitration depict conflict resolution as it *should* be done? And is the whole composite image to be understood as the gaze of Hephaestus, who in book 1 counselled the gods not to be affected by mortal quarrels, but who has just heard Thetis' tale of Achilles' woes? For all these reasons, we continue to debate what, if anything, the Shield tells us about the place of the Trojan War in the grand scheme of things.

### The plan of Zeus

One other way of looking at this question is to investigate Zeus' will or plan (both are possible translations of the Greek term *boulē*), to which the prologue of the *Iliad* alludes:

*Sing, goddess, the wrath of  
Achilles, son of Peleus,  
the accursed wrath which  
brought the Achaeans count-  
less woes,  
and sent down to Hades many  
mighty souls  
of heroes, and made them the  
prey of dogs and birds  
of all kinds, and the plan of  
Zeus was being fulfilled.*

The phrasing leaves open whether Achilles' wrath caused or resulted from Zeus' plan, and how much of the plan is covered by the present poem. Achilles, who is increasingly privileged in his understanding of where humans stand in relation to the gods, declares to Agamemnon in book 19 that Zeus engineered their quarrel to achieve many Achaean deaths. Indeed, we find in the poem many hints that Zeus deliberately prolongs the battle, including his provocative suggestion to Hera, cited above, of

bringing an end to the war, which she refuses.

Why would Zeus plan many deaths? One ancient reader of the *Iliad* compares the opening of a lost epic, the *Cypria*, according to which Zeus began the Trojan War because he wanted to reduce the burden of humankind on the earth. A different idea is found in the fragments of the *Catalogue of Women* attributed to Hesiod, a genealogical poem covering the entire age of heroes. At the start of that poem, men and gods feast together, but it appears to have concluded with a statement that divine-human interactions were to end with the Trojan War.

The *Iliad* itself does not say in so many words that the Trojan War marks the end of the heroic age. Some readers find in the poem an increasing sense of distance between gods and humans, especially after the gods leave the battlefield in book 22; others have argued that a newly 'moral' standard prevails among the gods in book 24, where there is near-universal denunciation of Achilles' treatment of Hector's corpse. The only thing of which the poet leaves us in no doubt is that for his audience, the age of the heroes is well and truly past. In one famous sequence, peaking in book 12, we find a brief moment of something like cosmic hindsight. A wall built by the Achaeans to defend their ships does not have divine approval; it survives as long as Troy does, but Zeus permits Poseidon and Apollo to ensure that nothing of this wall will survive afterwards. As the poet catalogues all the rivers they bring to sweep it away, he recalls that by the banks of Simoïs fell the race of men 'half-divine'. This adjective is a unique point where the *Iliad* meets with the distancing perspective on the heroes, found in Hesiod, with which our discussion began.

Unlike other archaic Greek epic, the *Iliad* offers no more than glimpses of the longer course of human history, and the moments of wider revelation found in the poem raise as many questions as they answer. But, as Homer's ancient admirers realized, sometimes, less is more.

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